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ABSTRACT

A critical rhetoric is needed for those interested in feminist discourse, a means of both persuasion and critique. It has been suggested that monologic, fundamentally one-sided argument is inappropriate for a feminist discourse that should instead teach methods of negotiation and mediation. Kenneth Burke proposed shattering views of ideological correctness, or "pieties," by juxtaposing a piety with another view of a different ideological stripe in such a way as to weaken or disintegrate the piety. A student in an upper division course in the rhetoric of feminist discourse practiced Burke's technique in writing a description of June Cleaver. Feminist writers have developed this technique as well. Frequently, feminists and others interested in social change also employ the technique of reversal--turning the seemingly natural on its head. Critics have observed that because the ruling class has a vested interest in maintaining univocity and the appearance of univocity as a naturally occurring phenomenon, aspects of struggle between two or more social languages (what has been termed "dialogism" by Mikhail Bakhtin) are often muted, obscured, or even censored. Periods of revolution improve prospects for more open dialogism. Feminist critics can recombine existing language features to create new discourse. (SG)

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Rhetorics of Resistance

> In a recent issue of PMLA, Victoria Kahn announces that:
> ...the rhetorical skill Aristotle describes allows not only for the persuasive representation (or concealment) of individual interests, as Plato feared it might, but also for the recognition and analysis of such strategies, that is, for the critique of ideology. (464)

Now, I'm all for an informed critique. But why, I wonder, is it necessary to limit rhetoric to "persuasive representation" and then to create a dichotomy between this "persuasive representation," and the critique of ideology, with the obvious privileging of critique? Knowing the limits of representation, are we supposed to assume that all we can do is sit around waiting for another piece of discourse to come in on the fax or the TV so that we can take it apart?

I certainly hope not. What I will be outlining here are notes toward a critical rhetoric, a means of both persuasion and critique. But first I want to address Kahn's concern about interest. It seems futile to pretend that any discourse is interest-free. Or to take the assumption of interest as a reason for refusal to speak except in critique.

Certainly books themselves that organize and articulate rhetorical precepts are designed with particular interests in mind. Take Aristotle, for example. Aristotle's Art of Rhetoric itself is designed for the ruling class, those with access to

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the courts and the assembly. I doubt that it ever occurred to Aristotle to write a rhetoric for women or slaves. Such a rhetoric would be quite different. It would assume a power imbalance between rhetor and audience. It would even assume a language shaped by the audience and not always useful to the rhetor. And it would suggest strategies to deal with these problems. The following, then, is a rhetoric interested in feminist discourse. I will call it An Art of Rhetoric, by Erimia, Aristotle's Sister. (Erimia, by the way, actually is the name of one of Sappho's students who is said to have died at age 19 of a broken heart because her parents made her spin and would not let her write.)

Others have begun to speak of such a rhetoric. Catherine Lamb, for example, in her recent CCC article suggests that "monologic argument,...an effort that is fundamentally one-sided," is inappropriate for feminist discourse and that we should instead teach methods of "negotiation and mediation" as they are "cooperative approaches to resolving conflicts" (18). I wonder, however, if the term "conflicts" best describes what feminists are concerned with. "Conflicts" implies disagreement between equals, quarrels which could be settled by negotiation. Even as a metaphor, "conflicts" is unfortunate, suggesting as it does a minor skirmish, rather than a major revolt against conditions of oppression, violence, and servitude held in place by dominant ideologies. And so I wonder, finally, why as feminists we think our only options should be negotiation and mediation.

Instead, how about Kenneth Burke's suggestion that change is brought about by shattering pieties using perspective by incongruity? This strategy involves the juxtaposition of one ideological correctness--what Burke calls a "piety"--together with another, of a different ideological stripe, in such a way that these two phenomena appear incongruous. Forced into such close association with something so grossly impure, the piety tends to disintegrate, or at the very least, weaken (69ff.).

On learning about this technique, Evelyn Christian, a student in my upper division course in the rhetoric of feminist discourse wrote a description of June Cleaver as tattoo artist in Haight Ashbury. As passersby we see June lounging in the doorway of her shop, wearing an overly-tight tank top and waiting for customers. On her left arm we notice three red hearts, labeled in succession: Ward, Bob, and Chuck. Piety, as Burke says, is the sense of what properly goes with what. The new June leaves several pieties looking less than sturdy.

Drawing on Nietsche's insights, Burke says, "Nietsche knew that every linkage

> was open to destruction by the perspectives of a planned incongruity. Throughout his life he "undermined," carefully qualifying his nouns by the juxtaposition of modifying matter that had the "wrong" moral inclination. (91)

Thus, the supposed mismatches can be done, as Burke points out, in a planned manner, designed to yield a critique as well as a new vision. In Evelyn Christian's depiction of June

Cleaver, there is, among other things, an implied critique of "happily ever after" endings, not to mention closure in general and plot resolutions. Moreover, there is the construction of a new June, one who loves deeply enough to engrave her lovers' names on her arm, one who does not feel the necessity to stay bound to one partner all her life, and one who has a decidedly entrepreneurial spirit. Jane Marcus also points out regarding tattoos that

> writing on the body is breaking a powerful patriarchal taboo for the people of Leviticus where the possession of the Logos is indicated by writing on the holy tablets. If human skin is made into a page or text, it violates the symbolic order. A Tattoo, then, is not only taboo, but it is the birthmark of the born-again--the self-created person who denies his/her birth-identity." (3)

June Cleaver, then, is unholy scribe, undoing the Law of the Father by multiplying the names and taking charge of the inscription.

Actually, though, feminist writers--as well as others interested in change--have figured out this strategy without having to hear about it from Kenneth Burke. For example, in the San Francisco anarchist journal The Blast, a writer with the probably spurious name of Pauline Smith wrote an article in 1917 entitled "Society's Wives Go to Church." The article begins:

> Every man [in this society] is supposed to have a wife --and nearly every man does, either a whole wife or

> else a part interest in one. Wives are bought in this rotten society. A supposedly first-class wife, fit for permanent use by a select gentleman, commands the price of being fed, clothed and named, with her owner's name, for life. Then a second-class wife, good for a year's use or so by a young gentleman not wishing as yet to invest in permanent property, is paid with enough to live upon while being used, and a little consolation fund upon being discarded. But the third-class wives...the wives who are fit but for a half hour's use. These wives are purchased by poor young men who can only afford a half-hour of them, and by such rich young men as have third-class taste....

Speaking of taste, Smith certainly breaches the canons of good taste by referring to prostitutes as "wives"--notice that she never employs the term "prostitute"--and at the same time pointing out the economic character of marriage for women.

Another technique employed frequently by feminists and others interested in social change is reversal--turning the seemingly natural on its head. Erimia, in fact, I believe was responsible for the ubiquitous bumber sticker that reads: God is Coming and Is She Pissed! Judy Syfer's frequently-anthologized "I Want a Wife," originally written for Notes From the Second Year, is another good example. Syfers reverses the concept of "woman" and of "wife." By implying that women might not want to be wives, but might want to have wives,

Syfers exposes wifehood as not a biologically-determined necessity, but a power-induced phenomenon. At the same time, she implies that men, in fact, could occupy the position of "wife."

Similarly, in 1911, Eleanor Wentworth wrote a critique of the story of Mary Magdalene for the socialist journal, The Masses. She begins by saying:

> Magdalene was born a woman, this bact, according to the dictates of man, prohibiting her from every field of life except love. And, therefore, she loved. But her love was as pearls cast before swine; it was abused and thrown aside.
>
> Society, with the unaccountable, contradictory attitude it sometimes manifests, censured her for doing the only thing it allowed her to do.

Wentworth continues, later in the article, saying:

> When Jesus saw her tears he wept and said: "See ye this woman? I say unto you, her sins which were many, are forgiven, for she loved much." Magdalene did not laugh at the sarcasm; she did not see it. That she should be granted forgiveness because she was placed in a hateful condition, and had suffered for it, in no wise appeared strange to her.

Finally, Wentworth concludes:

> One day a Messiah will arise from their ranks and will accusingly point out the real wrongdoer. And the accusations she makes will not be mild.

Introduced to the strategy of reversal, a student in my upper division writing class, Lori Tipton, wrote for the campus women's newspaper a chapter from Foreclosing on Love, a Harlequin-type romance. The novel features Michel Rousseau, an attractive young man, a flautist with the symphony, trying to save his indigent grandmother's home and Brooke Carmichael, the tough president of First National Federal Security Savings and Loan. I will leave you to imagine the details.

Another student wrote the following description:

> As I was passing by a construction area one afternoon on my way to class, I noticed several of the construction workers were on their lunch break. They all sat together on the grass watching the students go by. Suddenly, one of the men let out a loud provocative whistle and shouted to a female student walking in front of me..."Hey! Nice piece of ass!" Everyone walking by turned to look at them and when I saw them laughing, smirking, and poking elbows at each other, it just struck me. My God. They have PMS! Yes, that's right. Some men are also plagued with a serious problem similar to Premenstrual Syndrome known as Pubertal Masculine Syndrome, and also called PMS.

In this piece, Dieu Nga Truong does for gender and medical science what Michel Foucault does for history and sexuality or history and psychiatry. In Michel Foucault, the freedom of philosophy, John Rajchman quotes Foucault, saying that "what he

really wants is 'to do the history of objectivication of those elements historians take as objectively given'" Rajchman adds that "this is a prescription for reversal" (56). Dieu Nga Truong, on the other hand, does not do history. But she does point out the absurdity of the subjection of one class of people by another by means of labels of medical science which are taken as Truth. She reverses concepts in order to point out the arbitrariness of definitions and diagnoses. In the process, however, she also constructs herself as the one behind a female gaze, not as the one who is the focus of a male gaze.

The potential damage done to women who are denied the power of seeing and naming is documented by Cherrie Moraga, in her play "The Shadow of a Man." She juxtaposes colloquial Spanish and English to demonstrate the tension between the Spanish-speaking and English-speaking cultures; at the same time, though, she creates a new voice within this tension. She is able to say things otherwise unsayable in either Spanish or English alone. Both Spaanish and English are patriarchal languages, each one working to repress the other in American culture, English obviously usually dominant. But each also works to suppress women. By causing a collision between the two, Moraga allows the echoes of the suppressed woman's voice to be heard.

Fourteen-year-old Lupe is talking to her aunt, Rosario, about the fact that she keeps seeing the devil.

Rosario: Well, take it out of your head. It's not good for you.

Lupe: But I can'. I still see him sometimes.

Rosario: Quien?

Lupe: El diablo. Well, he's not like a real diablo, but like a shadow...a shadow of a man. I can barely tell he's there, jus' kinda get a glimpse of him like a dark smudge outside the corner of my eye, like he's following me or somet'ing. But when I turn my head, he always gets away. I jus' kinda feel the brush of his tail as he goes by me.

Rosario: Tiene cola?

Lupe: Si.

Rosario: El diablo. (48)

The word "diablo" never occurs in English in the play. Man, on the other hand, is never spoken in Spanish. Both are present, yet absent. English offers the freedom from "el diablo" yet presents "man" while Spanish offers the reverse. Between the two, there is the possibility of either doubled suppression or a carefully-wrought freedom. The danger/freedom web is complicated by the senses of touch and sight. The smudge, shadow, or trace that Lupe sees is confirmed by the sensation of touch. Yet it is in both these senses that Lupe finds freedom.

The danger/freedom contradiction as expressed in touch and sight deepens as the dialogue between the two women continues, and Rosario tells Lupe about a cousin, Fina, who had joined a convent. She says:

Rosario: Una vez, I went to see her en el convento. She change a lot. I saw her en la sala donde recibian a la gente y ahi estaba sentada con las manos (demonstrates), asleep

un'erneath esa tela...wha' you callit?...que tienen aqui en el frente?

Lupe: Scapular.

Rosario: Si, escapulario. Y las cosas que me afecto much...que hit me real hard...fueron los ojos. Her eyes had los' todo su pasion. Ay! Esos ojos verdes...they usetu burn como fuego! Later I found out they had to separate her from one of the monjas. They sent her to another convento. She was in love with the woman. (50)

At that point, Lupe shivers and we sense with her the presence of "el diablo" or "the shadow of a man." At the same time, however, Rosario's discourse clarifies the issue. She dan't remember the word "scapular," and when she is reminded in English, she quickly translates to Spanish, doubling it, in a sense. Yet what she cares about is her cousin's eyes--and how they have lost their passion. She is the one who can name the passion and demonstrate the danger in the dominant discourses to Lupe.

Mikhail Bakhtin describes this struggle between two or more social languages, calling it dialogism. More specifically, Bakhtin argues that because the ruling class has a vested interest in maintaining univocity and the appearance of this univocity as a naturally-occurring phenomenon, the dialogic aspects of utterances are most often muted or obscured, if not outright censored. (Try putting "The Shadow of a Man" on any required reading list.) In times of revolution, however, when the control of the ruling class is in the process of being

questioned and broken, the prospects for a more open dialogism are better (Voloshinov 24).

Likewise, after reading this, a student in the upper division Women's Studies writing class, Gabriela M. felt able to write the following poem for publication in the campus women's newspaper.

Como Ser Mujer/How to Be a Woman

Aveces pienso que no se que quiero
aser, Mama.
There is one world and yet another
I find myself a balance in-between
Primary goal: maintain equilibrium
Pero como?
I see who you are--madre, esposa
(courageous silent warrior)
So much that I value here
that the country to which you were transplanted
as a hopeful young bride chooses to devalue
(y yo soy parte de este pais to my pride and shame)
But my blood, my soul
seems to originate from an older place
And I can't help but think
that we are more alike than I ever imagined
Tu hijita
Mentalidad Americana, Sangre Chilena

Ella esta perdida

porque quiere ser both "woman" y "mujer."

Each of the strategies that I have mentioned makes use of existing language features, playing with them and recombining them to create new discourses. Erimia thus redefines kairos. Rather than seeking to be timely and appropriate, she advises looking for opportunities to be incongruous. She likes times of social crises. She wants to persuade not by reasoned propositions, but by mad juxtapositions and manic incongruities. She has given up on ethos, but is working like crazy on putting together any new subject positions that feel better than the ones she inherited.

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